

Pastor T.C. Arnold
10th Sunday after Trinity
Romans 9:30-10:4
July 31st, 2016

Have you ever known those people who think they've GOT it – but they really don't? You know, that person you used to play ball with – and he always believed he was the best player – but was far from it. That person at your school or at your job who thinks they are the best in the room, have a handle on the situation better than anyone else, thinks they have it all figured out – but they don't. That person who truly believes he's the best – but is actually one of the worst. I sometimes think of those young men and women who stand before those American Idol judges and belt their lungs out thinking they are the cat's meow but really... they are terrible.

Have you ever known those people who really do GOT it – but think that they don't? They've got what it takes, they've got the right stuff, they know how it's done – but THEY don't know it. They are too reserved – too humble. We call them unpretentious or unassuming. We know both kinds of people. We may even be naming those people in our minds right now. We ourselves may be one or the other – without realizing it.

Without realizing it or not – Paul sets right those who are the subject of this letter – the Romans – on how righteousness works. On the one hand, you have those people, who think they've got it – that is, God's righteousness, but they actually don't. Paul here is referring to the unbelieving Jews who thought that by their very ancestry, by the fact that they were God's chosen people, by the fact that they were given the Law of Moses in the desert and made every effort to keep that law, that they had earned God's righteousness. They were wrong. They didn't do enough. They couldn't do enough to earn God's righteousness by keeping the law.

On the other hand, you have those people who don't know they've got it – that is, God's righteousness, but actually do have it. Maybe to say they don't know is a little too presumptuous. These Gentiles – that is the “non-Jews” might have known, but the Jews themselves would never have thought so – or known. They've got it – not by keeping the law – but by and through the one person who kept the law perfectly for them – Jesus Christ the Lord. Through faith in Christ's righteousness earned for them, they've got this precious gift.

I hope you have heard this before. I hope you know this. We are not saved by keeping the law – because we can't and we haven't. Rather, we are saved by grace through faith in the one who was able to keep it perfectly. That's what St. Paul says and simply put – that's what this whole letter to the Romans is all about.

But because we are not saved by keeping the law doesn't mean that God does not want us to keep law. We are still required to keep God's law. You are bound by God to keep His law. And you see, it is because of that reason the Jews thought they were better. For the very reason that we are bound by God to keep the law, we must be better than everyone else because the law was given to us – and we keep the law. Or, we do our best to keep the law. Or, keep the law at least some of the time.

You see, that's not good enough. It wasn't good enough for the Jews and it's not good enough for you. In other words, the law you are required to keep – you are required to keep perfectly. Did you know that? Did you know that God requires you to keep the law perfectly? Did you know that God does not say in the scriptures – “just do the best you can.” “Just try your best and everything will work out – and it will be okay.” That's the mistake that the Jews made. They thought they were saved by, “doing the best they could,” and by being God's chosen.

But that's what we have been told and that's even what we tell our kids. That's what I tell my kids. Is it wrong? Is it wrong to tell our kids, our friends and neighbors, “just do your very best”? That's what my teachers used to say. That's what my mom and dad used to tell me. That doesn't

sound like it could be wrong. Is pastor telling us that, “doing the best we can” is the wrong thing to do?

That’s not what I’m saying. I pray that in all you do, you do the very best you can. But when it comes to standing before God with the condition of sin we have – when it comes to our life and what God expects – our best is not good enough. It will never be good enough. God expects perfection.

You are not good enough. You are not good enough to get into heaven. You are not good enough to be saved. But that doesn’t stop us from being puffed up with pride by thinking, “at least I’m not as bad as that person I saw on the television or read about in the paper. At least I haven’t done “this” or haven’t participated in “that.” Oh we are just like the Jews that Paul wrote about in the letter to the Romans, “At least I try to keep the law. At least I’m here at church on Sunday.” At least I’m not that bad...”

But you are – and none of us can escape God’s wrath, because we have let God down. We have not been what God expects and have not done what God has wanted us to do. We are not good enough. But there is one who has been and He took our place in death – taking every bit of God’s wrath – so that we can have life.

That one, as you know, is Jesus our ever-present and ever-loving Savior of the world. He took our place in death by being what we could not be – perfect before our heavenly Father. He was perfect for us. Our perfect Jesus made us who we are today – perfect in the eyes of our Heavenly Father. You see, the Father now looks at you through the blood of Jesus. He has covered you with this precious blood and washed you clean with it. He has made you a saint in His own eyes – because He loves you so much. By grace through faith – we have been made perfect – because of the perfect work – the perfect sacrifice – the perfect forgiveness – for much “less than” perfect people.

But without this faith we have nothing. Those who overlooked the Savior rely on something else – themselves, or another god, to save them. That’s why in the text for today Paul refers to a “stumbling block” for the Jews.

Jesus was that stumbling block. The Jews couldn’t get past relying on the law. They wouldn’t and couldn’t trust in Jesus. Their lack of faith prevented them from recognizing their Messiah when He came. He should have been the cause of rich blessing to them, but instead became the “stumbling block.”

The prophet Isaiah knew exactly what would happen 700 years before Paul would write to the Romans. Paul would quote Isaiah chapter eight and say, “*Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.*” But to those who cannot believe – those who won’t believe – Jesus is just a bunch of trouble. The world we live in thinks the same way.

Jesus just gets in the way. That’s what so many in the world would say. He cramps my style – my lifestyle. He gets in the way of living for myself rather than for my neighbor and my Lord. Some would even say Jesus gets in the way of peace. Jesus is a stumbling block to the world.

That simply is not true. Our Lord has done everything not to get in the way, but to come along side of this world and help. What other God would come to be one of us – take on flesh and blood, temptation and suffering for our sake. What other God became a servant of man, and would die for those He loves. What other God would do everything He could to save an unbelieving world even when that world would hate him – to death.

Is He a stumbling block for those who know from where our righteousness comes? No. He is an example in servant-hood for our neighbor. He is wisdom personified when human reason fails. He is our Lord who comes along side of us – in suffering and distress – in times of disunity and aggravation. He is our Lord who gave everything for His people. He is the fulfiller of the law where we couldn’t be. He and He alone is our righteousness. He alone is our way to everlasting life. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.